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Whither the Taliban?

by Mr. Ali A. Jalali and Mr. Lester W. Grau
Foreign Military Studies Office, Fort Leavenworth, KS.

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During the past four years, the Western media has written much about the Taliban movement in Afghanistan. The coverage has included the Taliban's genesis as a political/military movement and its rapid rise to power in the strife-ridden country. Reporters have addressed many important issues including the movement's fairly rigid and puritanical interpretation of Islam, its military and political significance, its human rights violations, and its potential for spreading its brand of Islamic extremism to the neighboring countries, particularly to the newly independent states in Central Asia.

In many instances, the description of the Taliban's behavior and the reactions of rival factions and individuals to the Taliban have been over-simplified. The cultural, religious and political underpinnings of the movement's ideology present keys to understanding its policies and whether the movement has the capacity to establish and administer a viable government in Afghanistan.

On the political side, the Taliban movement coalesced to bring order to a failed state. The Taliban's commitment to fighting corruption and lawlessness won them massive popular support. Thousands of young recruits from the refugee *madrasas* (religious schools) across the border in Pakistan swelled their ranks. Many ex-army officers and disaffected former Mujahideen commanders, who resented the continued infighting among former Mujahideen groups also joined. This popularity led to predominant military might and a tentative legitimacy to rule the country.

On the religious side, the Taliban represented the traditional clergy with historical roots in Afghan society. Talibs and Mullahs have historically mobilized the public to oppose both foreign invasion and encroachment on traditional societal values by the state. As the Mujahideen leaders, in pursuit of their personal and factional interests, failed to lived up to their commitment to Islam and national ideals, the moral core elements of the Taliban's declared political program paved their way to political power. The Taliban are Sunni Muslim-the majority religious sect in Afghanistan.

On the ethnic side, the Taliban movement is primarily Pashtun, the majority ethnic group that ruled Afghanistan for the past two and one-half centuries. During the civil war following the

collapse of the Communist government, the struggle for power between rival factions developed ethnic underpinnings. Continued control by the Tajik-led government of Burhanuddin Rabbani and Ahmad Shah Masud created discontent and a sense of powerlessness among the Pashtuns. The emerging Taliban movement began in the Pashtun area of Kandahar and then received extensive support from Pashtuns across the country who thought that the movement might restore their national dominance. Even Pashtun intellectuals in the West, who seriously differ with the Taliban on many issues, expressed support for the movement on purely ethnic grounds. Conversely, non-Pashtun intellectuals have opposed the Taliban, again for ethnic reasons.

Beginning in 1994, the emerging Taliban movement gathered military power backed by popular support. They drew their legitimacy from their commitment to end corruption. As they brought security, law and order to the areas under their control, public support grew.

However, the same factors that helped the Taliban to seize control of about 80 percent of the territory in less than four years, now mitigate against their efforts to establish an Islamic government in Afghanistan.

In matters of politics, the Taliban's restrictive policies, their lack of administrative skills, their economic failure, their dependence on Pakistan, and their international isolation have cost them a lot of popular support that they enjoyed at the beginning.

In matters of religion, their enforcement of a rigid and pre-modern interpretation of Islam, which prevailed mostly in Pashtun rural areas, clashes with accepted Islamic norms in the cities and other more-developed areas. The Taliban's imposition of far-reaching social restrictions has changed public perception of the movement. Many now consider the Taliban to be a reactionary and anachronistic force incapable of meeting the challenges of modern life.

In matters of ethnicity, the continued monopoly of power by the Pashtuns in the Taliban movement has blocked its acceptance as a national force. The opposition are primarily ethnic Tadjik, Uzbek and Hazara. The Hazara have another reason to suspect the Taliban since they are Shia Muslim.

These three aspects -- political, religious and ethnic-cultural - must be taken into consideration when examining the nature of the Taliban movement and its viability as a sustaining political force in Afghanistan. These aspects show that the Taliban conquest of most of the country does not mean the end of Afghanistan's misery, nor does it mean peace.

Despite negative press coverage in the West, there were many positive aspects to the Taliban cause. First, the Taliban brought order, security and purpose to large sectors of Afghanistan. Second, the Taliban disarmed large sectors of Afghanistan and brought hundreds of local warlords to heel. Third, the Taliban tried to impose peace. However, as the Taliban became more of an ethnic movement, the opportunity for real peace lessened as the Taliban determined to impose their particular beliefs on the entire country. The Taliban have rejected peace and unification proposals from many sources, including moderate Afghan Islamic leaders. The Taliban firmly believe that what they are doing is right and the only way. This sets the movement

in ideological rigidity and makes them reluctant to change. Further, should they compromise, they run the risk of splitting the movement and disintegrating into factions.

The Taliban will not be able to rule Afghanistan exclusively for the following reasons:

- The Taliban have brokered many of their conquests through moral persuasion, bringing peace and security to areas controlled by corrupt petty-warlords, buying out certain local commanders and other arrangements with a war-weary populace. The ultra-traditionalist Taliban, however, have imposed strict Islamic law which in many cases includes banning television, music, smoking, women's schools, games, chess, kite-flying and anything else that could be construed as entertainment. They have tried to disarm the populace. The Taliban have imposed their parochial interpretation of *Shari'a* [Islamic law] and cited it to stone women, suspected of adultery, to death and to hack off the limbs of thieves. Many people who have lived under Taliban rule have found the atmosphere stifling.
- The Taliban have little practical experience in government and much of their leadership is barely literate. They are primarily rural clerics. Without participation from other groups, what government there is ground to a halt. There is little-enough talent to draw from. Pre-war Afghanistan barely had more than a ten percent literacy rate. Many of the best and brightest have emigrated.
- The Taliban represent only the majority ethnic group, but hardly the mores of that group. Afghanistan, once one of the most liberal of Islamic societies, wants peace but is not eager to live under a puritanical regime which controls every facet of life. Further, all tribes and ethnic groups want representation.
- Only Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have recognized the "Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan". Its' seat at the United Nations is held by the opposition. Some of its nervous neighbors (Iran, Tadjikistan, and Uzbekistan--as well as India and Russia) feel that Pakistan is behind the Taliban (who supports the Taliban to further their own national objectives in the Northwest Frontier Province).
- The Taliban are accused of condoning production of narcotics. While the use of drugs is not allowed by the Islamic religion, it can bring the Taliban cash at the expense of "infidel" society and lead to the deterioration of that society. With Afghanistan's poppy fields rivaling the "golden triangle", the world does not consider this purported view favorably. However, public Taliban statements condemn the use and production of drugs and actual Taliban support of narcotics production is an opaque issue.

- The United States was generally less committed to and less involved with the future of Afghanistan following the Soviet withdrawal. Osama bin Laden established his headquarters in Afghanistan and reached an accommodation with the Taliban. When the US embassies were bombed in East Africa, the United States held Osama bin Laden responsible and demanded his extradition. The Taliban refused, replying that under the laws of traditional Pashtun hospitality, they can do no less for their staunch supporter during the Soviet-Afghan War. United States missile attacks and press attacks on Afghanistan for harboring terrorists have further poisoned the relationship. With the supposed departure of Osama bin Laden, this relationship might improve slightly.
- Most international organizations have withdrawn from Afghanistan and have ceased to provide aid due to the lack of security and the Taliban policy toward women. This policy also prevents recognition by many governments of the world.

The history of Afghanistan demonstrates that seizing Afghanistan is the easiest part. Retaining control is the difficult part. As the winter snows melt and the military campaign season begins anew, the fighting will again flare up. But the real challenge, to restore Afghanistan to peace and prosperity, will wait. The Taliban have demonstrated, so far, that they are not up to the challenge. To effectively rule, they must moderate their policies, broaden their base of support and participation and draw the intellectuals and professionals into their ranks.